United Nations E/CN.17/2009/15

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 March 2009

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development
Seventeenth session
4-15 May 2009
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*
Thematic cluster for the implementation cycle 2008-2009 — policy session

High-level regional meeting on the theme "African Agriculture in the Twenty-first Century: Meeting the Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution"

Note by the Secretariat

Summary

A high-level meeting organized by the Commission on Sustainable Development jointly with the Government of Namibia on the theme "African Agriculture in the Twenty-first Century: Meeting the Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution" was held in Windhoek on 9 and 10 February 2009.

Discussions during the meeting, supported by presentations delivered by experts, were centred on three main themes: (a) how to operationalize a green revolution in Africa; (b) integrating African agriculture into global markets; and (c) managing Africa's agricultural transition.

The outcome of the meeting was the Windhoek High-level Ministerial Declaration, which calls for an integrated response by African countries and the international community in support of sustainable agriculture and rural development approaches, and stresses the importance of food security and strengthening the agriculture sector in Africa. The Declaration will be presented at the seventeenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, to be held from 4 to 15 May 2009 in New York.

* E/CN.17/2009/1.

09-25721 (E) 240309

I. Overview

1. In preparation for the seventeenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, of the Government of Namibia, jointly with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, organized a high-level ministerial meeting of the Commission in Windhoek on 9 and 10 February 2009.

2. At its sixteenth and seventeenth sessions, the Commission is considering the issues of agriculture, rural development, land, drought, desertification and Africa. Africa faces particular challenges in all of the first five thematic areas. At the sixteenth session of the Commission, it was recognized in particular that African agriculture is critical for African development and faces challenges that must be addressed in order for sustainable development to be achieved for Africa as a whole.

3. At the meeting, consideration was given to how African Governments and other stakeholders could meet those challenges and take forceful policy and practical measures, in cooperation with the international community and development partners, to revitalize African agriculture and the broader rural economies in economically, socially and environmentally sustainable ways. In particular, high-level African decision makers engaged in a discussion of some of the key challenges related to African agriculture, as highlighted in the reports of the Secretary-General on issues relating to the sixteenth and seventeenth sessions of the Commission.

4. The meeting was an opportunity for African policymakers to prepare for discussions at the seventeenth session of the Commission by identifying key issues and initiating a debate on effective responses at all levels. The key output from the meeting was the Windhoek High-level Ministerial Declaration on African Agriculture in the Twenty-first Century: Meeting the Challenges, Making a Sustainable Green Revolution,[1] which has been endorsed by African ministers and will be officially presented as an input to the Commission at its seventeenth session.

II. Organization of the Meeting

5. The meeting was attended by more than 120 participants, including ministers; heads of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes; representatives of the secretariats of three environmental conventions and of a number of African regional organizations; and resource persons from the major groups. The Deputy Prime Minister of Namibia, Libertina Amathila, opened the meeting, which was co-chaired by the Minister for Environment and Tourism; the Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands, Gerda Verburg, acting in her capacity as the Chairperson of the Commission at its seventeenth session; and the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations.

6. Sixteen resource persons selected for their expertise on the topics to be addressed at the conference led the sessions and made presentations, providing a wealth of material that facilitated discussions.

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[1] See E/CN.17/2009/14.

III. Meeting agenda

7. The meeting was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister of Namibia, who highlighted the importance of achieving sustainable agricultural development and the pressing need for integrated planning in the area of sustainable resource management and use on the African continent. The Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands proposed a five-track approach to addressing the challenges facing African agriculture: substantially increasing investment in agriculture; creating an enabling environment for entrepreneurship; developing sustainable production chains; improving market access; and enhancing food security and emergency food aid. The Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs called upon the international community to support a uniquely African sustainable green revolution in order to achieve food security and to ensure that world markets remain open to African agricultural exports.

8. The meeting focused on three main themes: how to operationalize a green revolution in Africa; integrating African agriculture into global markets; and managing Africa's agricultural transition. The first two themes were divided into two sub-themes each, which were discussed in parallel session:

(a) Sub-theme 1.1: Incorporating sustainable land management and agricultural practices into African agriculture;

(b) Sub-theme 1.2: Increasing agricultural productivity in Africa;

(c) Sub-theme 2.1: Moving African agriculture up the value chain;

(d) Sub-theme 2.2: Integrating small farmers into global supply chains.

9. The overall objective of the discussion on the first theme was to contrast two approaches to improving African agriculture: (a) importing a model based on the intensive use of improved seed varieties, capital, inputs and fertilizers; and (b) developing agriculture in more sustainable ways by improving soil, land and water management and agricultural practices.

10. The issues examined under sub-theme 1.1 included the impact of sustainable soil and land management and agricultural practices on agricultural productivity (yields, crop failure), including the impact of crop biodiversity on yields; advances in sustainable land management practices; and changing paradigms for staple crops, in particular the system of rice intensification.

11. The issues considered under sub-theme 1.2 included the potential of the various agricultural production systems in the various agro-ecological regions of Africa; the policies needed to increase not only the level but also the effectiveness of investment in the agricultural sector (e.g., absorptive capacity and sectoral infrastructure); the research and development models needed to boost the development of varieties adapted to African agro-climatic conditions, including for future adaptation to climate change; and the policies that must be put in place to best support the efforts of farmers to adapt to climate change.

12. At the end of the first day, high-level experts gathered at a round table to discuss the future of African agriculture. The round table provided an opportunity to review some of the most important topics discussed that day.

13. The overall objective of the discussion under the second theme was to illustrate the role of Governments and various institutions in the process of supporting and promoting the transition from a subsistence-oriented agriculture, which characterizes most African agriculture, to a market-based agriculture and eventually to an export-based agriculture focused on value addition. The session was aimed at giving participants a better appreciation of policy options in terms of support for agricultural supply chains, both to position the agricultural sector strategically and to support farmers in their transition process.

14. The issues examined under sub-theme 2.1 included infrastructure and capacity-building needs, with a view to meeting requirements in terms of standards and certification and in the sanitary and phyto-sanitary areas; models of institutional support for high-value agricultural exports that could work in Africa; ways of achieving the sustainable management of resources in an export-oriented agriculture; and the applicability and implications of fair trade and other models.

15. The issues considered under sub-theme 2.2 included lessons learned from recent experiences with the reform of the cotton, coffee and other sectors with respect to organizing supply chains and securing the livelihood of smallholders; innovative models aimed at managing the transition from self-sufficiency to a larger-scale, market-based agriculture (including providing associations of small farmers with the capacity to produce at a consistent level of quality); and innovative models aimed at sustainably managing the biofuels boom while upholding smallholders' means of livelihood, in particular access to land.

16. The third session focused on ways of managing the transition of African agriculture in the next decade. An introductory presentation recast issues related to agriculture in the broader demographic and economic context faced by Africa. Particular focus was placed on the implications of demographic trends and the globalization of supply chains for the development of policies aimed at ensuring continued and strong job creation and enabling rural development. The presentation was followed by a round table in which five African ministers participated. The round table provided an opportunity to review some of the most important topics discussed during the two days.

17. The fruitful discussions held and the strong consensus achieved were reflected in the final outcome of the meeting, the Windhoek High-level Ministerial Declaration. The Declaration (E/CN.17/2009/14, annex) will be presented at the seventeenth session of the Commission to be held from 4 to 15 May 2009 in New York.

IV. Main results of the meeting

18. The substance and content of the meeting and the various sessions met with appreciation by many participants. The topics addressed at the five sessions were seen as relevant and balanced, and many presentations received praise. The fact that some of the speakers were from the major groups added real value to the sessions and was greatly appreciated by the groups themselves, which felt they were making a meaningful contribution to this important meeting.

19. Between sessions, there were fruitful interactions between resource persons and high-level Government officials. Such interactions can contribute to real policy

dialogue and concrete action. For example, some Government officials from Africa and representatives of regional organizations officially invited some of the experts who spoke at the meeting to engage in more detailed discussions and give briefings on specific topics in their home countries.

20. The meeting provided a good platform for forging a strong consensus text to be agreed at the upcoming session of the Commission. The consensus was reflected in the Windhoek High-level Ministerial Declaration, which calls for an integrated response by African countries and the international community in support of sustainable agriculture and rural development approaches, and stresses the importance of food security and the strengthening of the agricultural sector in Africa. The Declaration was adopted by acclamation at the final session of the meeting.

21. Many participants expressed the view that the Windhoek Declaration was a strong and specific document that provides real value-added as an input to a negotiated outcome in the Commission. The following points in particular are reflected in the Declaration:

(a) The recognition that a green revolution for Africa will involve not only seeds and fertilizers, but also sustainable land management and agricultural practices, crop diversity, and ecosystem services;

(b) The recognition that the focus must not be only on crops but also on livestock;

(c) The need for a strong focus on and support for smallholders (secure land rights, quality extension and training, support for farmers' associations, credit availability, risk management instruments, rural infrastructure);

(d) The need to reform, improve and find alternatives to classical extension services, in particular in order to facilitate farmer-to-farmer diffusion of knowledge and know-how;

(e) The need to integrate the transformation of African agriculture into the broader demographic and economic challenges facing Africa.